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## A.G. Rizzoli: Master Architect

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# THE SHAFT OF ASCENSION

IN PROJECTED MAJOR  
WHICH EUTHANASIA  
IS AVAILABLE TO  
THOSE DESIRING  
AND MERITING A  
PLEASANT, PAIN-  
LESS BON VOYAGE  
FROM THIS LAND.

THE SHAFT OF  
BENEDICTION, IN  
WHICH LIFE LEAVES  
THE BODY AND  
ASCENSION OCCURS

8

CONCLUDING  
EXERCISES  
SALUTATIONS

7

OFFICIATING  
CEREMONIES  
IN WHICH ANGELIC  
FIGURES APPEAR

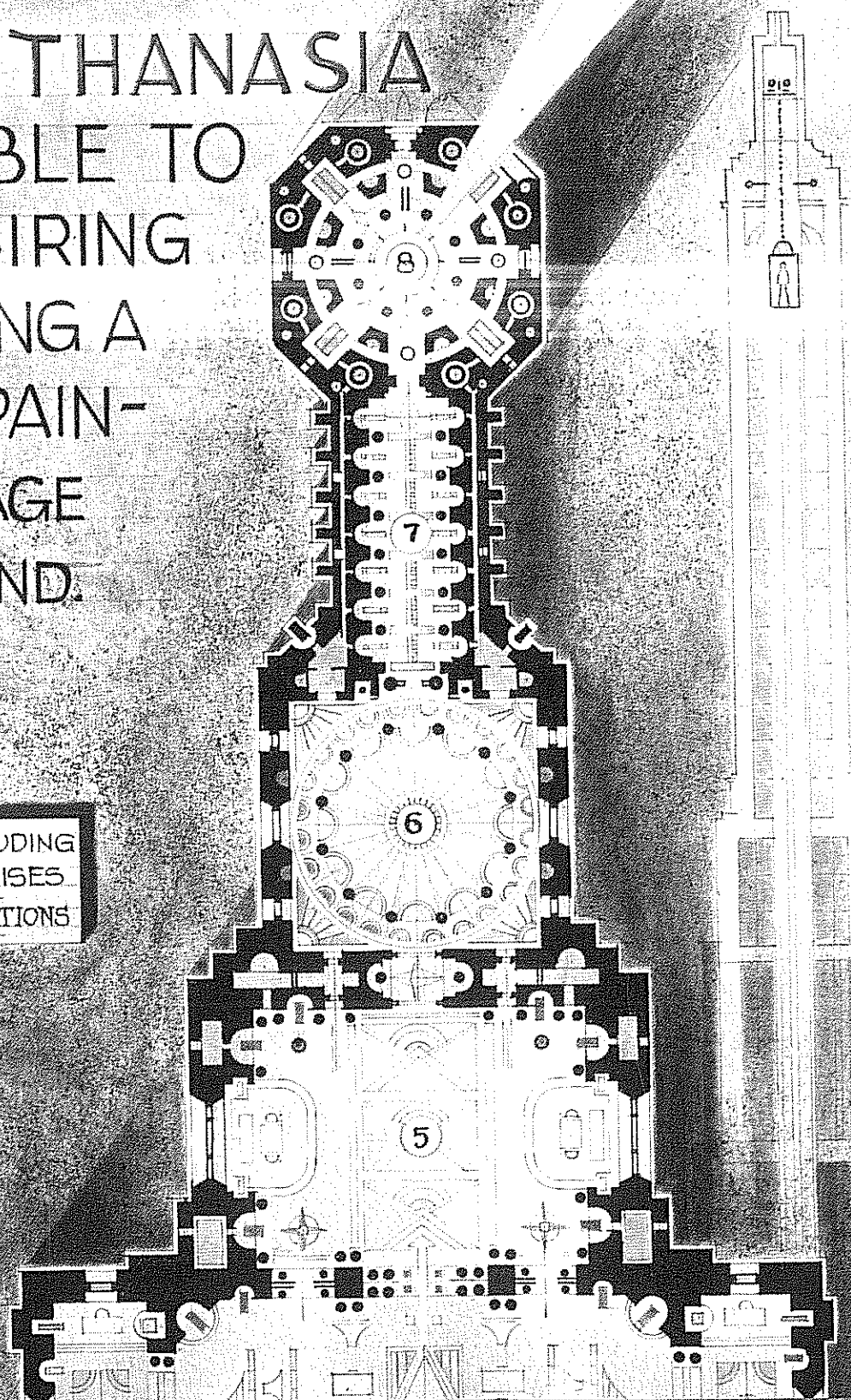
6

SECOND  
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VISION

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THE GOAL ALL SHOULD STRIVE TO REACH

# Achilles G. Rizzoli: Master Architect

A draftsman by day, the artist spent his nights building a magnificent alternative reality

BY JO FARB HERNÁNDEZ

The story of A.G. Rizzoli, whose complex, enigmatic work was introduced to the public in 1997, is both striking and compelling. A lifelong bachelor who lived with his beloved mother, he was traumatized in his teens by his father's disappearance. Introverted and sexually repressed, his personal circumstances were characterized by pain and powerlessness, stimulating a need to reorder and balance his life. Quietly and loyally laboring on mundane drafting work during the day, he spent his nights and weekends on a monumental yet secret task: the delineation of a new world, for which he served as "High Prince" and "Master Architect."<sup>1</sup> Undertaken at the command of spiritual guides, these drawings and writings have been hailed by scholars as the "find of the century."

The exhibition *A.G. Rizzoli: Architect of Magnificent Visions* runs from September 14-January 5 at Intuit.

All drawings and photos courtesy of The Ames Gallery, Berkeley, CA. All images © The Ames Gallery.

Detail: *The Shaft of Ascension*, 1939. Ink on rag paper, 21 1/16 x 13 in.



Achilles Rizzoli was born in 1896, the fourth of five children of Innocente and Erminia (Emma) Rizzoli, who had immigrated to Marin County, California, from culturally Italian areas in southern Switzerland.<sup>2</sup> In 1912, he moved to Oakland to study at the Polytechnic College of Engineering, soon to be joined by his mother and siblings. Three years later, following assorted family and economic struggles, his father disappeared, never to return. In 1933, having lived for short periods with various relatives in several San Francisco neighborhoods, Achilles and his mother settled by themselves in a modest four-room cottage on Alabama Street, where he was to live for the rest of his life. Achilles, or A. G., as he later preferred to be known, made few friends and never married; he shared the single bedroom in the house with his mother, and his writings reveal that he remained a virgin.

While at the Polytechnic College from 1912 to 1915, Rizzoli took classes such as mechanics, geometry, electrical engineering and magnetism. At this early stage, his interest in architecture was already evident: he even used his English assignments to explore subjects such as construction, drafting and inventions.

During these years, the San Francisco Bay Area was steeped in images of a utopia shaped by architectural visions. The 1906 earthquake and fire had sparked energetic efforts to revitalize San Francisco, and its victorious rebirth was symbolized by the grandiose optimism of the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition. Given his youthful interests, it is no wonder that Rizzoli would decide to pursue a career inspired by the heroic efforts of architects not only to rebuild the city, but to define its cultural future.

Rizzoli worked at a variety of low-paying jobs during those early years. At the same time, he undertook a series of ambitious creative endeavors: his first, dating from 1927 to 1935, was a series of novellas and short stories featuring the utopian efforts of a group of idealistic architects. Verbose,

stiff and boring, each manuscript was rejected in turn by the various publishers to whom it was submitted; in his files he kept all 280 rejection notices as well as each methodically typed-out text. Next, under the pseudonym Peter Metermaid, Rizzoli self-published his novel *The Colonnade* (aka *Colonnaded Plaza*). He neither marketed nor distributed it, however, and the three thousand copies remained wrapped and stored in his home.

Frustrated by the lack of positive response to his literary works but still inspired by utopian fantasies, in 1935 Rizzoli shifted to producing large pen-and-ink renderings of architectural designs. Utopian images are found throughout the history of visionary architecture, but Rizzoli's elaborate buildings were unusual in that most were symbolic representations ("transfigurations," in his words) of people he knew, intended to glorify a heavenly world of his own creation.



Group View Adjoining 1668 Alabama St., 1934.

He later referred to his works from the period 1935–44 by the acronym SYMPA, each letter designating a separate category of drawings. *S* stood for the Symbolization drawings, some two dozen large renderings of classic-style buildings, each of which symbolized a family member, acquaintance or event. *Y* referred to the Y.T.T.E. series (pronounced it-tee), an acronym for "Yield To Total Elation," a half-dozen plot plans delineating a symbolic world exposition. *M* represented Miscellaneous lists, signs and poems. *P* were the PIA drawings, short for Piafore (itself an invented word referring to

the common pinafore dresses worn by the young girls in his neighborhood), including buildings and monuments in the Y.T.T.E. and portraits of those involved in it. A was his Amplification of these four categories of drawings in the *Achilles Tectonic Exhibit Portfolio*, in which he recorded and interpreted his work to date.

The first drawing in the Symbolization series was *Mother Symbolically Represented/The Kathredal*, a combination birthday card, full-scale drawing honoring and symbolizing the strength, beauty and spiritualism of his mother, and premiere structure in the Y.T.T.E. world exposition. Many of the Symbolization buildings are described on the drawings themselves as "heavenly homes" or "heavenly inheritances," meant to symbolize an actual metamorphosis of the person following death, as well as an architectural personification of their essential attributes.

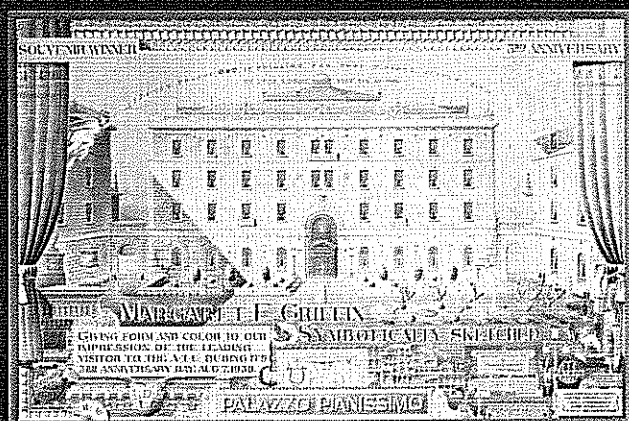
The meticulously crafted drawings for this rapidly developing imaginary world combined Beaux-Arts architectural idioms<sup>3</sup> with an eclectic borrowing of Roman, Renaissance, Baroque, Art Deco and Art Nouveau styles. Spectacular lighting displays reminiscent of a Hollywood premiere (but probably more specifically referential to the lighting for the Panama-Pacific Exposition), as well as more populist elements of commercial advertising and a hyperbole worthy of P.T. Barnum, complemented the central structures. This fusion of styles,<sup>4</sup> many of



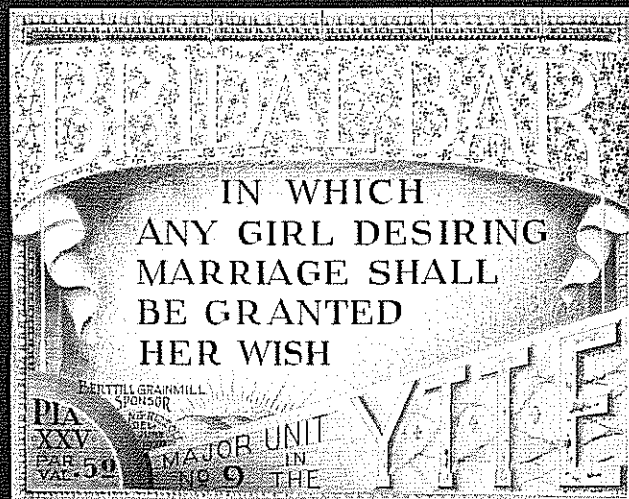
*The Spirit of Cooperation/Academically The Essosee, 1935. Ink on rag paper, 17 9/16 x 23 5/8 in.*



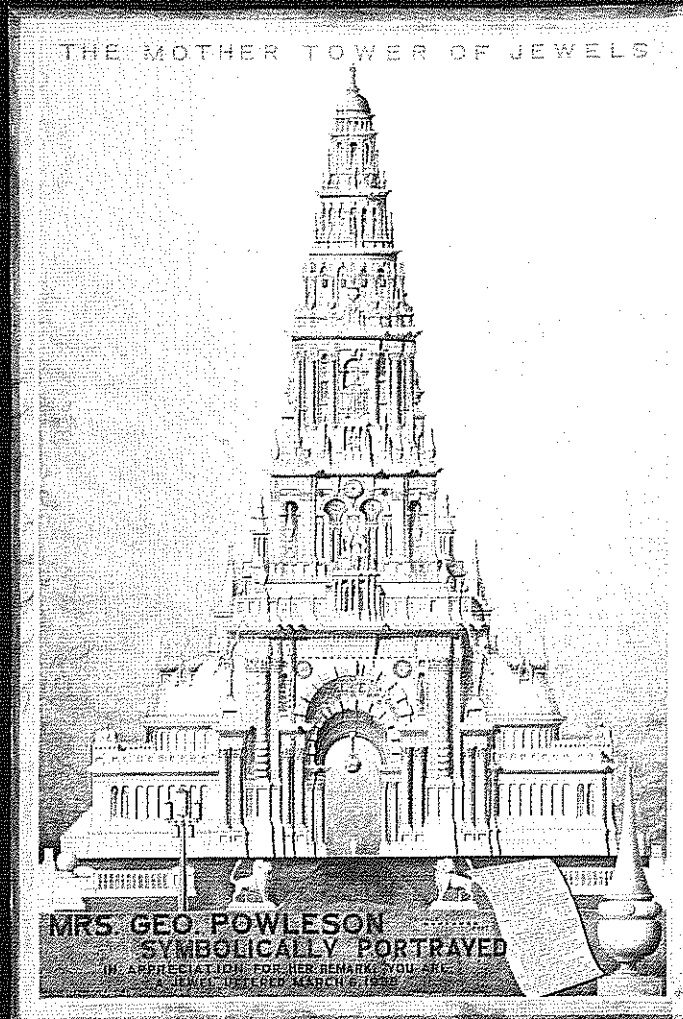
*The Ornament, 1938. Ink on rag paper, 17 7/8 x 8 7/8 in.*



*Margaret E. Griffin Symbolically Sketched/Palazzo Pianissimo, 1938-1939. Ink on rag paper, 24 x 35 3/4 in.*

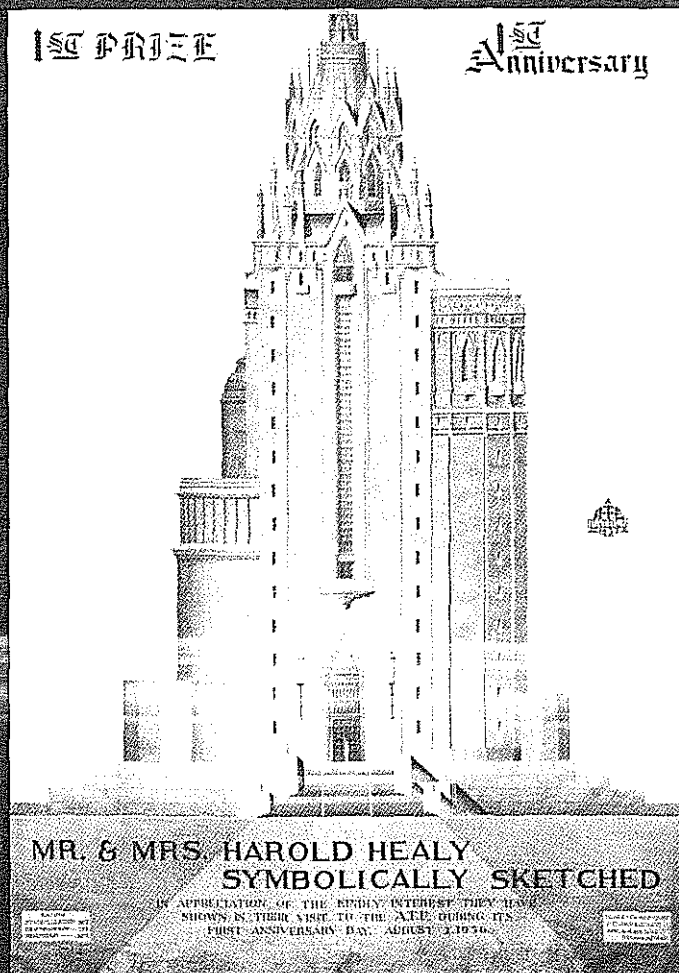


*Bridal Bar, 1939. Ink on rag paper, 8 x 10 in.*

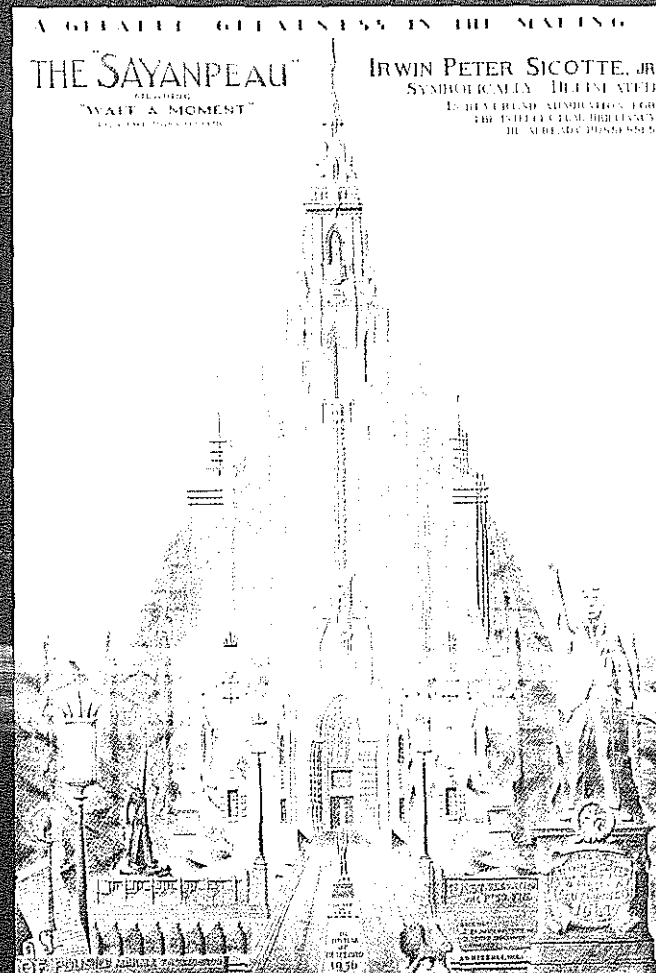


*Mrs. Geo. Powleson Symbolically Portrayed/The Mother Tower of Jewels, 1935. Ink on rag paper, 37 x 25 1/8 in.*

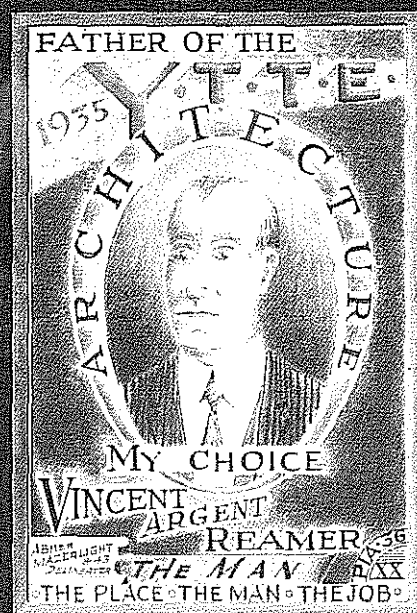




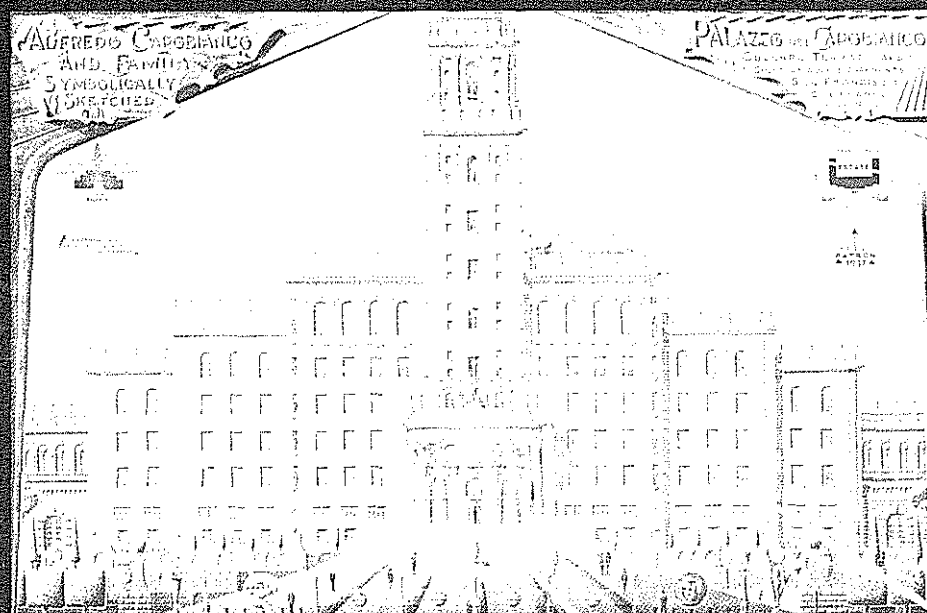
Mr. and Mrs. Harold Healy Symbolically Sketched/First Prize, First Anniversary, 1936.  
Ink on rag paper, 35 1/2 x 24 5/8 in.



Irwin Peter Sicotte, Jr. Symbolically Delineated/The "Sayanpeau," 1936.  
Ink on rag paper, 35 3/8 x 23 1/2 in.



The Man, 1943. Ink on rag paper, 9 x 6 1/8 in.



Alfredo Capobianco and Family Symbolically Sketched/Palazzo del Capobianco, 1937.  
Ink on rag paper, 24 9/16 x 38 5/16 in.

which Rizzoli had probably seen only in books, was a juxtaposition not many could have successfully presented without parody. Such satire would have been unthinkable to him, however, given his self-assigned title of "earthly architectural assistant and transcriber" to God.

His drawing technique followed the elaborate Beaux-Arts system, which was predicated upon numerous draft concept and detail sketches; however, although Rizzoli was a prodigious accumulator, with books, lists, newspapers, letters and other documents found among his effects, no extant sketches were found that might have shed additional light on the development of the Symbolization drawings. Close examination of these drawings reveals very little trace of preliminary graphite outlines; his penned lines are sure and steady, and his detailing is tight and compulsive. His notes, frequently recorded on the drawings themselves, indicated that a single rendering would often require several months of devoted labor. Though a small man, Rizzoli made some drawings that were almost as large as he was: the largest approach 5 by 3 feet.

Rizzoli always desired a public audience to appreciate his creative efforts, so beginning in 1935 he set aside the first



Rizzoli's mother, 1934.

Sunday in August as an open house to display the evolving SYMPA drawings. He arranged a "gallery" in the front room of his house for the "Achilles Tectonic Exhibit" (the A.T.E.); his 1940 *Portfolio* documented a floor plan and elevations of the walls indicating how he had installed the drawings. To advertise, he put up hand-lettered signs around the neighborhood, but few people ever attended.

The year 1936 was pivotal for Rizzoli, both personally and professionally. Local events such as the dedication of the San Francisco Bay Bridge and the groundbreaking for the 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition must have stimulated his own utopian visions. This was also the year that he joined Otto A. Deichmann's small architectural firm as a draftsman, working in a windowless room for \$1.50 an hour, a steady if not satisfying position<sup>5</sup> he was to hold until his retirement almost 40 years later.

Then, in late summer, 21 years after the disappearance of Rizzoli's father, the family was startled by the news of the discovery of Innocente's deteriorated bodily remains in a deeply wooded section of Marin County, the result of an apparent suicide. Later that same year, Rizzoli's mother was hospitalized, and died January 8, 1937, at age 63. Her passing, following so closely the trauma of identifying his father's body, struck him hard.

Rizzoli did not change their house after her death, and it slowly began deteriorating around him. He seemed oblivious to all this, however, as he became increasingly involved in the design of buildings for the exquisite heavenly domain that would follow this earthly "saddening well of tears."

The drawings were enhanced with pictorial and emblematic insignia such as those found in legal or ceremonial documents; he must have felt they lent authority and validity to his labors, and he used them liberally. They contrasted with the unusual mix of emotional, witty and

quasi-erotic commentary that encircled the central building images. The insignia and commentary—unconventional in architectural renderings—signify that although at casual glance these drawings appear to be bona fide renderings of buildings that could have been built, they were actually symbols that through metaphor, allegory and pun simultaneously beckon and exclude us from his private world.

Despite the seriousness of his goal, Rizzoli's sense of humor is revealed through the names of his imaginary "collaborators" (for example, Victor Betterlaugh and John McFrozen), public sculpture (such as *The Sungkenart*, "commemorating the lost art of remaining virgin lifelong"), buildings (the "P.P.P." and the "A.S.S." were the bathrooms), and the ancillary titles, acronyms, puns and comments lettered around the border in illuminated characters.

As he continued to design and render new buildings, he concurrently developed a plot plan to situate the increasing number of structures constituting his utopian exposition, the Y.T.T.E. Modeled after the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition, the Y.T.T.E. plot plan is also reminiscent of the floor plan of a cathedral. From 1935 to 1944 Rizzoli produced a half-dozen full revisions of the plot plan; even later, from 1958 to 1977, when he was consumed with other works, he returned again and again to the Y.T.T.E., retracing and copying the plot plan, indicating revisions, redesigns and additions. Yet he was ambivalent about his labors, writing that "from the beginning the Y.T.T.E. contemplation was a source of agony, of invisible things made visible by heavenly hosts projected upon the visible azure"; in contrast, elsewhere he commented about how fulfilling it was to do God's work. He compared himself to Saint Veronica of Umbria (1660–1727), who lived with almost continuous visions and revelations, yet was considered "practical and level-head(ed)"; he suggested that her "predicament" was similar to his, and paralleled the challenges he faced.

With each incarnation, the number of structures included in the Y.T.T.E. exposition increased; by 1939, 80 separate building units were included, as well as 20 "Major Statuary Compositions." In contrast to the full-scale Symbolization "portraits" of specific family and friends, the Y.T.T.E. images monumentalized such abstractions as Labor, Life, Poetry, Happiness, Culture and Peace.



Rizzoli at work

Rizzoli experienced increasing numbers of visions from 1945 on; fully formed images of elaborate "heavenly inheritances," they came to him at any and all times, day and night. In a final attempt to share his spiritual experiences with others, Rizzoli began a new project on February 9, 1958, which he would work on for the rest of his life. This was the A.C.E., or AMTE's Celestial Extravag(r)anza, a compilation of over 325 24-by-36-inch graphite on vellum sheets originally intended to poetically reproduce his "sunbursts" of visions linking poetry and architecture, but which he came to believe were the basis for the third, and final, testament of the Bible. AMTE (or Miss AMTE, as he formally referred to her) was introduced to his readers in the first poem of the A.C.E., his

personification of Architecture Made To Entertain, a virginal consort of Christ who was Rizzoli's mentor, guide and "principal collaborator." She partnered him through the A.C.E.'s 2,600 pages<sup>4</sup> of poetry, prose and graphic imagery as he attempted to reproduce the words and visions of saints, historic heroes, departed family members and even Christ himself through means "acceptable to spiritual authorities." More than his other works, the A.C.E. pages specifically document the increasing visionary experiences that inspired and yet agitated him.

Work on the A.C.E. continued until February 23, 1977. With his last piece (titled "Rest in Peace...Awhile") uncompleted, Rizzoli suffered a stroke that left him permanently unable to speak or move. After it became clear that he would never be able to return to Alabama Street, his niece and her family cleared out the house, discovering for the first time the treasure trove of his drawings and writings. The proceeds from the sale of the house were used to support Rizzoli in a convalescent home during the last four years of his life. He died on November 18, 1981 at age 85, and is buried next to his mother in a cemetery near San Francisco.

Through his drawings and writings, A.G. Rizzoli bypassed his quotidian reality as the low-paid blue-collar son of poor immigrants, becoming a self-appointed collaborator with God and protégé of the saints. His personal isolation and internal torments conditioned the development of his work until it became a much-preferred alternative reality, yet he was able to maintain both objectivity and a sense of humor about the two identities that he inhabited.

Masterfully expressing both his vulnerability and the power deriving from his role as Master Architect, Rizzoli's private labors have become renowned public achievements that both challenge and appeal to our aesthetic and cultural norms. ■

*Adapted from "Divine Design Delights: The Life and Works of A.G. Rizzoli" in Jo Farb Hernández, John Beasley and Roger Cardinal's A.G. Rizzoli: Architect of Magnificent Visions. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1997). Hernández, curator of the Rizzoli exhibit, is director and curator of the Natalie and James Thompson Art Gallery at San Jose State University. She is also director of the national organization SPACES—Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments, and is currently engaged in researching and writing a book on Spanish art environments.*

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> All quotations from Rizzoli are taken directly from his various writings and drawings.

<sup>2</sup> My warmest thanks to Bonnie Grossman, director of the Ames Gallery, Berkeley, California, who conducted much of the early research on Rizzoli, and who graciously shared her findings with me through numerous interviews between 1990 and 1996.

<sup>3</sup> The first formal model for architectural training in the U.S., it was so known because of its inception and principal advocacy at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris.

<sup>4</sup> Kevin Michael Day astutely noted Rizzoli's innovative juxtapositions of distinct iconographic elements. "Rizzoli's drawings present an ingenious interface between the high art of the Beaux-Arts rendering, and the popular mode of the commercial advertisement. Unlike the more democratic perspectives proposed by current social theories of art, the hierarchical division between the high and the popular was the accepted convention in the 1930s. This fact makes Rizzoli's art all the more unique from our present understanding." Day, "Allegorical Architecture: Interpreting the Visions of A.G. Rizzoli" (Master's thesis, University of California at Berkeley, 1995), 26.

<sup>5</sup> Deichmann's designs were rather unimaginative, and differed markedly from the drawings Rizzoli did on his own time.

<sup>6</sup> It may be assumed that Rizzoli had no preconception that the A.C.E. would become as massive as it did; periodically he writes of finishing, although he continued until his health prohibited further work almost 20 years after A.C.E.'s inception.